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THE RUSSIAN EXPERIMENT

Newspaper editorials are not always superficial, nor yet ephemeral. The following, from the *New York Evening Post* (August 16, 1921), deserves an enduring niche in social science:

In a decree signed by Nikolai Lenin on August 9 and embodying a radical reorganization of the Soviet system of economic control, these are the compelling reasons cited for the abandonment of the pure Communist principle:

First, the vast number of enterprises which the State attempted to direct without having adequate supplies of food and material.

Second, the confusion of powers and handling of supplies, which resulted in "too much red tape, cross instructions, and irresponsibility."

Third, the fact that with such methods of supply "and with the methods of remuneration of labor, those engaged in production were not and could not be interested in the work or in the improvement of the methods of production."

Fourth, the war and the extreme exhaustion of Russia.

In this summary from Moscow we have a fairly sufficient reply to the regrets one still hears from well-meaning people in this country that Russia has not been "permitted" to work out the great "experiment" upon which she entered under Lenin's guidance in October, 1917. Lenin himself has now told us just what are the forces that have hampered the great experiment. The war, which is usually cited as the great reason for Bolshevik collapse, is only fourth and last in Lenin's diagnosis. All the other evils that have beset the Russian experiment were born out of that experiment.

An unhappy looseness of language has made it possible for a great many people who ought to know better to speak with wistful sympathy of the Communist experiment. They have confused the laboratory with life. In science the investigator is permitted to create his own conditions and environment. If he needs a vacuum he is given a vacuum. If he wishes to neutralize the factor of gravitation he is permitted to do so. If he needs a soundless room he gets his soundless chamber. If he needs dark, light is eliminated. If he needs intense light the sun is magnified for him. The scientist is permitted to create the isolated state of nature necessary for his experiment.

Social and political experiments cannot be conducted in a vacuum, but in life. The statesman would write himself down a fool who should expressly demand, for the success of his experiment, the elimination of human motives, passions, interests, customs, beliefs, habits, traditions, and even prejudices. Least of all can he demand exemption from the consequences of his own acts. That is what happened in Russia. If you use guns to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat you must expect those who are against a dictatorship of the proletariat to use guns against you; and you get civil war. If you abandon your allies at the climax of a life-and-death war you must not expect your former allies to love you. If you set out to eradicate the "bourgeoisie," then your industries will collapse for want of technical leadership. In the midst of the tragedy of Russia there is comedy, too, in the puzzlement of the Communist leaders. They merely set out to destroy a "capitalistic" world and they wonder why the "capitalistic" world does not regard their experiment with sympathy.

Neither the war, nor the civil war, nor the much-belabored "blockade" will account for Lenin's confession of the failure of his experiment. The experiment has failed because Lenin could not secure the political and social and historic world vacuum which his fantasies called for.